

**PARENTS ALSO GET ABUSED: LESSONS FROM SELECT FILMS AND
BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS**

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Abstract

There has been so much discourse on the abuse of children by parents, teachers, guardians and other caregivers and less attention is given to the fact that parents too have been victims of abuse by their adult children. Matter of fact, the abuse of parents in family circles has increased in recent years for a variety of reasons, including the increasing proportion of older adults in the total population, also the related increase in chronic disabling diseases, and the increasing involvement of families in care giving relationships with the old. In this wise, this paper identifies and conceptualizes the problems of parents or elder abuse in a wider perspective, while defining it in the context of the Nigerian situation. It explains elder abuse from the global and historical perceptive, identifying the various forms of abuse, their prevention and intervention strategies, societal norms to confront it, the roles of individuals, family, the society and government and teaching the rights of older persons. This effort is to create awareness and sensitize the individual, family, society and government about the problems and consequences of continued, unabated gross abuse of senior citizens as they live in silence and ignorance of their rights. This paper selects films and Biblical accounts for framing conceptually relevant and effective prevention strategies as well as for understanding the specific character of the broader issue of the intergenerational nature of the quality of life in an aging African and Nigerian society, and discovers that there are no enough programs and laws put in place to secure the welfare and emotional security of the aged parents. It finally concludes that although the law enforcement in some instances have apprehended the assaulters but there still exists, a void in policy formulation in order to forestall future disrespectful occurrences.

Keywords: Parents, Abuse, Film, Biblical Accounts

Introduction

Abuse of parents by their children, also known as child-to-parent violence (CPV) or Elderly Abuse, is a form of domestic violence and is one of the most under-reported and under-researched subject areas in the field of humanitarian services. People are more sympathetic to propagating the Stop Child Abuse campaign and little attention is turned to the abuses the elderly suffer from the hands of young adults. Parents are quite often subject to levels of younger people's aggression in excess of normal childhood aggressive outbursts, typically in the form of verbal or physical abuse. This abuse has been defined by Cottrell (2001) as any harmful act of a teenage child intended to gain power and control over a parent. The abuse can be physical, psychological, or financial. Though this type of abuse often takes places during the teen years (often from 12 to 17), it can happen earlier than that. There have been some reports of children younger than 10 years old, who for instance, refuse to run errands for their parents, neglect attending to house chores and even do not visit their parents. The saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child is stemmed out of the resolve that children have obligations of respecting the elders and playing the roles that seek to establishing and sustaining relationships of parents versus their children. In Nigeria for instance, elders who are not gifted with children look up to other peoples' children as theirs and any form of disrespect from the young children could trigger an emotional reaction from the elderly. Nevertheless, the effects of experiencing abuse from one's child can be profound. In the short term, ongoing parent abuse has been found to impact on a parent's and other family members' physical and psychological health, with specific negative emotions such as fear, shame, and guilt and despair commonly reported (Cottrell & Monk, 2004)

The causes are yet to be properly studied, as there seems to be very little research on that, but the assumption that a child is abusive because he/she have suffered some form of abuse in first place goes against some of the evidence which shows this is not true in many cases. Some abusive children have had very normal and adequate upbringing from loving and caring parents. As Declan Coogan says in his book; *Child to Parent Violence and Abuse - Family Interventions with Non-Violent Resistance*, that being violent because of violence exposure is a simple common-sense explanation, which is preferred by most because it fits the society norms for understanding people's behavior (23). Finally, it is really a complex

phenomenon which may derive not only from individualized issues, but also from structural societal and cultural factors.

Elderly Abuse in Global Perspective

The classification of abuse is based on identified experiences and cultural definitions from different backgrounds. What is classified as elder abuse in one environment may not be regarded as abuse in some environments. Cultures have peculiar expectations in relationship behavior. A slight deviation is considered abuse of that relationship. For example, a new *Elderly Right Law* passed in China wags a finger at adult children, warning them to "never neglect or snub elderly people" and mandating that they visit their elderly parents often; regardless of how far away they live. The law includes enforcement mechanisms, too: Offspring who fail to make such trips to their parents face potential punishment ranging from fines to jail term. Karina Martinez-Carter, explains:

Chinese parent-child relationships have become a bit complicated lately. Eastern cultures like China's adhere to the Confucian tradition of "filial piety," which prioritizes the family unit and values elders with the utmost respect. But China's rapid industrialization has forced people to flock to urban areas for work, causing many adult children to move farther away from their parents, who often remain in rural areas and are unfit to pick up and move (3)

It obvious from Karina's explanation that the way cultures view and treat their elderly is closely linked to their most prized values and traits. For example, not only do Koreans respect the elderly, but they also celebrate them. For Koreans, the 60th and 70th birthdays are prominent life events, which are commemorated with large-scale family parties and feasts. As in Chinese culture, the universal expectation in Korea is that roles reverse once parents get old, and that it is an adult child's duty (and an honourable one at that) to care for his or her parents.

Like the Chinese and the Koreans, the Japanese prize filial piety and expect children to dutifully tend to their parents. But Japan also faces the unique problem of tending to an increasingly elderly population. According to Asuman Kiyak and Nancy R, Hooyman (2010), 7.2 percent of the Japanese population will be 80 or older in 2021 (compared to 4.1 percent in the U.S.), which will likely lead to a host of new problems for the country. Adult diapers are already outselling baby diapers, and the pension system is on course to dry up.

Western cultures tend to be youth-centric, emphasizing attributes like individualism and independence. This relates back to the Protestant work ethic, which ties an individual's value to his or her ability to work; something that diminishes in old age. Anthropologist Jared Diamond, who has studied the treatment of the elderly across cultures, has said the “geriatric in countries like the U.K. and U.S. live lonely lives separated from their children and lifelong friends. As their health deteriorates, the elderly in these cultures often move to retirement communities, assisted living facilities, and nursing homes” (32)

Unfortunately, it is difficult to imagine such an Elderly Rights Law being a legislative priority in many Western cultures. France did, however, pass a similar decree in 2004 (Article 207 of the Civil Code) requiring its citizens to keep in touch with their geriatric parents. It was only enacted following two disturbing events: One was the publication of statistics revealing France had the highest rate of pensioner suicides in Europe, and the other was the aftermath of a heat wave that killed 15,000 people; most of them elderly, and many of whom had been dead for weeks before they were found.

Just like in Nigeria and in other African regions, the Mediterranean and Latin cultures also place similar priority on the family. In both African and Mediterranean cultures, it is commonplace for multiple generations to live under one roof, sharing a home and all the duties that come with maintaining one. In the contemporary iteration of this living arrangement, the oldest generation often is relied on to assist with caring for the youngest, while the breadwinners labour outside the home. As such, the aged remain thoroughly integrated well into their last days.

Although, in as much as cultures have similar ways of caring for the old, (like the Mediterranean and Nigerian) there still exists varying cases considered abuse which may not constitute same in seemingly similar cultures. An example is the issue of institutionalization of elderly. In Western countries such as the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom, it is not considered abuse when a member of a family takes an elderly member to an Old Peoples’ Home or a facility for old people where care is given. The same idea is not welcome in Nigeria as such facilities for old people are even mostly run by religious bodies and some few Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) In Nigeria, occupants of special homes are mostly destitute and elderly people whose children and relatives have abandoned them. Worst still, some occupants may be people who were picked from the streets and rehabilitated while others, probably, were

removed from their homes on information supplied by neighbours following confirmed cases of neglect and abandonment.

Recently a top government official, in an interview on Nigerian national television, was asked why government was reluctant to build such facilities for the elderly. His response was that the idea of old people's home was *alien, un-African and disrespectful to the elderly*. The premise of his allegation is on the assumption that it is the responsibility of the children or relatives of an elderly person to take care of them just like the Nigerian saying that when the rabbit grows old, it depends on the younger ones for sustenance.

Consequently, the interviewee concluded that if his children took him to such a home, he would curse them every morning till he dies. A walk around Nigerian urban centers would confirm that commercial drivers and their assistants (conductors) shout at, and bully, the slow and sluggish older persons who would find it difficult to cope with the fast-paced activities associated with urban transportation and would even tell them to "go and die at home!"

Similarly, the scripture in Ephesians 6:1-4 says:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this right. Honor your father and mother (this the first commandment with a promise), that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land. Fathers do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (ESV).

The verses above said that children should obey their parents in the Lord, for this right which means that children should not in any way refuse to obey their parents but do that which they are told to do. They should not disregard or disdain their parents but respect them. By doing so, it will go well with the children on earth, which means they will be blessed. However, noncompliance or refusal will attract a curse. On the other hand, parents too are warned not to provoke their children to anger but to bring them up in the discipline, love and instruction of the Lord. The younger ones are therefore, to care for the elderly in the society and not just their parents. However, because there are many forms and categories of abuse, this paper has classified the forms and has equally pointed out the underlying abusive tendencies by the acts of omission or commission.

Elderly and Parents Abuse in Select Films

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane, released in 1962; is a story of two aging sisters, one of whom is paraplegic and confined to a wheelchair on the second floor of their Hollywood home. The movie features stunning performances by paraplegic Blanche (Joan Crawford) and her abusive, psychologically imbalanced and alcoholic sister Jane (Bette Davis). In the course of the film, Blanche is horrifically abused by Jane. The film presents a chilling but not-so-unrealistic portrayal of elderly abuse. Blanche suffers several types of abuse in the hands of her sister, which can be classified as follows:

1. *Verbal abuse.* Blanche is called names and verbally demeaned by Jane.
2. *Physical abuse.* Blanche is struck several times in the movie, including one chilling scene where she is kicked several times as she lays on the floor.
3. *Deprivation of services.* Blanche desperately tries to call a physician and Jane interrupts, making sure the doctor does not arrive.
4. *Psychological abuse.* Blanche is kept isolated and the phone is taken away.
5. *Starvation and willful neglect.* Blanche is deprived of food, and given several meals that discourage her from eating.
6. *Physical restraint.* Blanche is eventually tied to the trapeze bar while in her bed.
7. *Financial exploitation.* Jane practices Blanche's signature and signs checks in her sister's name.

The unfortunate victim recognizes her sister's disturbed mind and tries to survive by appealing to the saner aspects of her personality. Joan Crawford presents us with an accurate portrayal of a person embarrassed, frustrated, and overwhelmed by her isolated, abusive situation. She desperately tries to get help while Jane descends into a world of fantasy, self-delusion, and violence. In doing so, Jane reveals several hallmarks of an abusive personality, not the least of which is the defense mechanism of denial. On several occasions Jane puts her hands over her ears when the topic of discussion turns to her own behavior.

The events featured in this film are unfortunately common in day-to-day human interactions, but frequently go unreported and unnoticed. In this case, the abuser was the victim's sister, but abusers can have many roles including spouse, adult child, or unrelated caregiver. Although primary care providers are sometimes in the best position to diagnose and intervene, they may however, not be trained in warning signs or reporting mechanisms.

The Blood Sisters

Similar to *Whatever Happened to Jane*, is a Nollywood film titled *The Blood Sisters*, played by Genevieve and Omotola and directed by Tchidi Chikere in 2003. The story too, revolves around two sisters; Esther and Gloria. Esther develops an unjust hatred for her elderly sister Gloria, who is more intelligent in school and is always coming out with better grades in her examinations. Gloria is further blessed as she finds and marries a wealthy man and they both move to live in the city. Esther is pained with yet another found success by her sister and is already putting in place, some evil machinations to usurp the marriage and render her elder sister hopeless. She moves to stay with them in the city and Gloria welcomes her warmly and takes good care of her too. In spite all nice treatments from Gloria, Esther goes ahead to poison Gloria's food and finally killed her. Gloria is dead and Esther is bent on marrying her dead sister's husband. The mother is very bitter about the evil Esther has committed and the entire village elders are summoned to stop Esther from marrying her elder sister's husband but all warnings are not heeded to by Esther. She finally gets pregnant for her late sister's husband.

Esther has abused many elders in this movie:

1. *Parental abuse*. Esther refuses to obey her mother (who raised her as a single-mother). She refuses her advice but goes ahead to commit the abominable act of killing her own sister and seducing the husband.
2. *Murder and Covet of the Elderly*. Esther is driven by envy that she pursues her evil passion to deprive her sister of her marriage happiness through the act of covetousness.
3. *Treating community elders with disdain and scorn*. Esther ignored an entire Council of Elders and in her community and walked out on them in a meeting. This, in Africa, is the highest form of disrespect and abuse of the traditional authority.

Daddy Must Obey

The film is directed by Sunday Nnajiude. It is a story of two little brothers played by two Nollywood midgets; Chinedu Ikedieze (Aki) and Osita IHEME (Paw-Paw). The film showcases the stubbornness of two children against their father who is played by Sam Loco Efe. The two miscreants have dropped out of school because of their nasty attitudes and have returned to terrorize their elderly father. They insult him, fight him, set traps to humiliate him, disgrace him and sometimes,

steal the only money he has on him. In the same film, Fatima's husband played by Chinwetlagu, suffers all kinds of abuse from his wife. She would beat and force him to cook, sweep wash her clothes including her panties and other under wears.

It can be seen from these analogies that the abuse of the elderly is not limited to child-to-parent alone. Matter of fact, it can be between two elderly adults; with a younger adult abusing an older adult. It can also be among spouses where a younger spouse abuses an older one. Wherever an adult is harassed, whether in the home, office, bus, school, hospital or any other public or private place, it amounts elderly abuse.

Sharon Stone

This movie features Genevieve Nnaji (Sharon Stone), a psychedelic lady who is so passionate and desperate to make money by employing all gimmicks to attract men to her. She moves to the city to milk very rich and wealthy businessmen to amass wealth to herself. She meets other high class of girls and in order to maintain her pseudo-personality, she lies to her friends about her family. She says her mother is a rich business woman who holidays in Dubai and the Caribbean and so other classy things about her family. Meanwhile her mother is a peasant old farmer in a remotest village in Ibo land. Abandoned by her daughter for years, the mother decides to search for her daughter and visit her in the city. Luckily, the old woman finds her daughter and with happiness and satisfaction on a successful search, calls her by her native name and attempts to embrace her daughter in the presence of her new friends, Sharon Stone pushes her mother away from her and queries the old woman where she knew her from. She tells her friends that she does not know the old woman. The more the old woman tries to convince her that she is her mother, the more profusely she is pushed out. Finally, the woman is abandoned and dies of grief.

To further analyze the movie, *Sharon Stone*, most writers of parents and elderly abuse have discovered that mothers and women have suffered greater degrees of abuse as compared to fathers and men. In 2004, Robinson of Brigham Young University, published: *Parent Abuse on the Rise: A Historical Review* in the American Association of Behavioral Social Science Online Journal, reporting results of the 1988 study performed by Evans and Warren-Sohlberg The results reported that 57% of parental abuse was physical; using a weapon at 17%; throwing items at 5% and verbal abuse reported at 22%. With 82% of the abuse

being against mothers (five times greater than against fathers) and 11% of the abusers were under the age of 10 years. The highest rate of abuse happens within families with a single mother. Mothers are usually the primary caregiver; they spend more time with their children than fathers and have closer emotional connections to them. It can also be due to the size and strength of the abuser and women are often thought of as weaker and even powerless.

Categorizing Elderly Abuse in Nigeria

Pensions are not enough to allow for reasonable quality of life. Irregular payments and long delay in payments of gratuities after retirement are examples of abuse. Periodic, hectic and improperly conducted verification and registration of pensioners is gross abuse of the elderly. For those who did work in these sectors and are not entitled to pensions, no social security system is available to cushion the effect of lack of income in old age. They also suffer difficulty in accessing government services due to mistreatment and harassment by government officials. Age discriminatory policies and practices and the lack of adequate policies to cater for the needs and welfare of the elderly constitute elder abuse. Another very significant form of abuse of the older person is the insecurity and violence that older people are subjected to in conflict situations and emergencies and lack of provision for the older persons in relief programmes. Man-made and natural disasters do happen and the elderly are usually not considered in rescue plans and rehabilitation processes. For example, the condition of the elderly in Darfur-Sudan is dehumanizing. There are countless examples in Nigeria. A walk round IDP camp in Daudu-Benue State of Nigeria and other Northern cities in the country will further reaffirm this point. The recent communal clashes in some parts of Plateau State have left the elderly in the regions vulnerable to untold hardships because frail and feeble older persons were abandoned in the various homes, some burnt along with the buildings when help was not forthcoming. Government did not make any special arrangement or even consider the elderly in its rehabilitation programmes after the crises.

Notwithstanding, many people, during their active years, worked in the informal sectors like farming, fishing, business, etc without pensions or any other forms of income after retirement. They therefore depend solely on children and relatives for their livelihood. Even for those who worked in the formal sectors, the

irregular, insufficient and even non-payment of gratuities and pensions, force them to look up to their children for financial assistance. Unfortunately, the financial and economic stress being experienced by the children due to the prevailing economic climate makes filial obligation very hard task. To these prevailing circumstances, most people who have dependent elders consign the needs of the elderly relative to the bottom of the list of issues to be given attention. Any increase in the financial allocation to any other responsibility affects that of the elderly. Most times the inability or failure to give is spurred by the statement, "After all I am not his only child; others too should give".

However, The Bible says: Give and it shall be given unto you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Lk 6:38). Therefore, children should not maltreat or neglect their parents for whatever reason, whether they were not taken care of as a child or not. They should do their own best and God will bless them for taking good care of their parents. And their children too will care of them in return. Migration, urbanization and industrialization greatly contribute to the risk factor of abuse as many elderly ones live in isolation and loneliness. Unfortunately, Children who should have provided strong companionship in old age are scattered all over the world in search of the proverbial Golden Fleece. The attraction of employment opportunities in cities has made them leave their parents and relatives in the rural areas where majority of the elderly reside and are therefore left to the vagaries of lack and poverty. Festive periods such as Christmas, Easter and Ramadan are the only times when some *fortunate* ones get to see their children. Immediately, the children return to their places of work in the cities and the elderly are left alone to continue to face the hard realities of living.

Although, some may argue that taking the aged relative to the city sometimes could also constitute a risk of abuse as the dislodgement from the natural habitation to a new unfamiliar terrain where the opportunity to socially interact with peers is non-existent may adversely affects the older person. Other critics may still argue that the elderly who have children abroad might enjoy the regular receipts of packages from across the oceans but does the contents of such packages substitute for the presence and care from loved ones?

There are many perspectives to elderly abuse; unfortunately, most people who are abused may never know they are victims, especially in Africa. Some elders may think they have possessed more than enough especially with most needs already provided for by income from investments they had during their hay

days, unfortunately, the lack of companionship from their children, even in the midst of plenty, puts them at risk of abuse.

In some African societies especially, when one grows old, he/she is automatically branded a witch or wizard and is believed to be responsible for all mishaps such as famine, deaths, poor agricultural yields, natural disasters and regrettably, flimsy accusations like stagnation of promotions of the younger ones in their places of work in cities.

Again, an elderly woman who outlives her husband faces many unpalatable experiences meted to her by some traditional customs. The accusation is more established if the woman looks frail and bent from the process of ageing in poverty. Many elderly women have been put at risk of this gross abuse of their person, although with the upsurge and quest for western education, a lot of people are turning away from such beliefs but countless others still practice it. For example, burial rituals and horrific mourning rites subject the old widow to inhuman and cruel practices. Sometimes it takes from having her dress in very uncomfortable clothing for a long period of time, eat on the tombstone or graveside or drink the water used in washing her late husband's body to prove her innocence of accusation of killing her husband. This is abuse at its peak!

Even in the church, when a widow is mentioned in the scripture it appears to carry the ideal of a woman who has no one to provide for her. They are often grouped with vulnerable members of the society, such as the fatherless, aliens and the poor (Deut.14:29 and 16:11). The Bible says widows should be treated with honor and compassion and offered protection so that no one takes advantage of them. In Africa and in Nigeria in particular, the main purpose of marriage was to produce children and heir to carry the family line. A childless widow endured double adversity, with no husband to care and protect her. Thus, God recognized the widow's plight and rose to her defense: "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows is God in His holy dwelling" (Psalm 68:5). Deut. 27: 19 says a person who denied justice to a widow was cursed by God. "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow". This is what the church preaches and stands for, that no one should mistreat widows and their children but care for them (John Ahar, interview 12/3/2021).

The practice of forced levirate marriages, where the widow is passed on like a piece of furniture to the brother or male relative of the late husband as wife even when it is against her wish is another form of abuse.

Nevertheless, in as much as the caregivers are rebuked and accused of abusing the elderly, it should also be noted that when consideration is not given to the problems encountered by the caregiver, the possibility of the caregiver also abusing the care-recipient is almost certain. For instance, when the government or other employers fail to promptly pay salaries and wages to the caregiver, or when the economy becomes so recessed that income of the caregiver can no longer take care of his needs and responsibilities, abuse becomes imminent.

Government policies too affect and promote abuse. The lack of political will by the government to make laws and institute policies specifically to address issues of the well-being of the elderly, issues of prevention and interaction, and how to seek redress in cases of abuse of the elderly makes the elderly susceptible to abuse. Some failed governments, for instance, also share the insensitivity and disrespect by subjecting the senior citizens, who had worked very hard and retired, to a so-called verification exercise for pensioners and requires they are physically present before they are paid the peanuts called pensions. The lack of a social security system to carry the burden of these people who have put in the strength of their youth to build the nation allows all forms of abuse to be constantly meted out on them. No respect or considerations are given even for those who are sick, tired, incapacitated, demented or poor.

In Africa generally, most public buildings are not constructed to be elderly-friendly. Instead of implementing architectural policies for providing lifts and carriages for elders in storey buildings, most buildings in Nigeria, especially hotels and offices rather provide very steep staircases as the only alternative for accessing offices and rooms respectively. There are also no specific crossing points for the elderly such that at road crossings, commercial motorists would shout abusive words at the elderly as they struggle to stoop their way to the other side.

Conclusion

The paper has identified and conceptualized the problem of elder abuse in a wider perspective while defining it in the context of the African and especially the Nigerian situation. It therefore, explained elderly abuse from the global and historical perspectives with special references to movies, the church and the general Nigerian society. The paper also identified the various forms of abuse, their prevention and intervention strategies, the confronting societal norms, the

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roles of individuals, family, the society and government and teaching the rights of the older person in addition to seeking redress.

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